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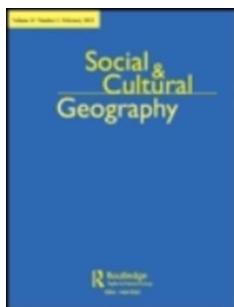
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'The fieldworker not in the head's office': an empirical exploration of the role of an English rural primary school within its village.

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Title

‘The fieldworker not in the head’s office’: an empirical exploration of the role of an English rural primary school within its village.

Abstract

The paper presents the findings of a project exploring the role of an English primary school inside its rural village.ⁱ The fieldwork discovered the school had lacked a full-time headteacher for a number of years and the paper explicates three dynamics to unravel why: (a) interpersonal issues (high staff turnover and the legacy of a former head); the (b) political-economic development of the village and its shifting local ‘squirearchy’; and finally (c) the construction of the spatial environment of the village (post-war expansion and the situation of amenities). These three dynamics possessed a synergy and this was key in seeing the complexities of this rural environment and its bearing upon social relations such as the absent head. It therefore supports recent theorising positioning interpersonal power alongside the temporal and spatial character

of a local environ. The paper concludes by using this insight to consider what problems the school – and any new headteacher – might face in the immediate future.

The research is based upon ethnographic fieldwork conducted in 2009-11. Using a multi-strategy research approach, the paper draws upon participant observation, interview, documentary, visual and historical material in support of its analysis.

Key words: Cultural capital; village; rural; school; space; squirearchy.

Introduction: researching and representing England's green and pleasant land

The paper presents the findings of a project exploring the role of an English primary school inside its rural village. In Wolcott's (1983) seminal school ethnography, he came to be known as 'the man in the principal's office' during his fieldwork. In contrast, the school studied here simply did not have a full-time headteacher (head) during the fieldwork (2009-11), inviting the research to explore why and leaving the researcher to find a different 'appropriate role' (Pole 2007:67). The fieldwork discovered the school had lacked a full-time headteacher for a number of years and this paper presents an analysis of why. The theoretical representation of rural spaces is in renaissance after a period of post-war stagnation and now offers a rich array of concepts to support empirical work (Marsden 2006) including post-structural thought (Woods 2009). Cloke (2006) argues a multi-paradigmatic climate now exists, in which established political-economic models (Marsden and Murdoch 2006) sit alongside post-structuralist geography (cf. Murdoch 2006, Bell 2007) and, most recently, non-representational theory (Anderson and

Harrison 2010, Thrift 2007, Lorimer 2008). Post-structuralist geography has been represented through the metaphor of networks (Halfacree 2007, Murdoch 2006), quite different to Scott's (2000) social network analysis as an empirical technique, and has some parallels with political-economic analyses that view rural spaces operating through vertical and horizontal regional networks (Marsden 2006). Another line is an interest in the operation of the 'expressive component' or 'expressive infrastructure' of spaces as they operate at the micro analytic level (Lash and Urry 1994:6, Thrift 2012:1). In the field of childhood studies, for example, how children can make use of the space around them in out-of-school moments (Christensen et al 2011) or in institutions (James and Curtis 2012).

Cloke (2006) notes that existing concepts may still be profitable despite the lure of pastures new in such 'revitalised' theoretical times (Cloke 2006:xi). The use of the ideas of Pierre Bourdieu by rural scholars is an example (Phillips 2002, 2005, 2007, Sutherland and Burton 2011, Sutherland 2012, Heley 2010). Broadly speaking, the importance of culture has re-gained momentum as a theoretical idea (Cloke 2006:22, Williams 1973, Woods 2009). In rural studies, the cultural dimension is well-established through the themes of migration (newcomers and the 'urbanisation of the countryside'), technological change and economic shifts (often at the EU level) (Pahl 1965, Newby 1985, Marsden and Murdoch 2006, Woods 2009). It also sits comfortably with the ethnographic and interactionist approach employed here. Therefore, studies of village communities emphasising the importance of cultural action and social exchanges in their accounts are now discussed ed now, before the research findings are presented.

The programme of empirical work by Phillips (2002; 2005; 2007) on gentrification is one such example, Phillips specifically applied Bourdieu's plural understanding of capital – production sitting alongside consumption – to examine rural change in terms of the built environment. Phillips (2005) argued such 'spaces are made ready for contemporary gentrification in part through practices of the past' (Phillips 2005:482). His empirical project was rich and multi-strategy, drawing together census material, changing population and household sizes, landownership patterns, density ratios, as well as interview data to see a rounded pattern of change across different villages and regions (Phillips 2002; 2005). Phillips' meso-level research strategy downplayed the more cultural dimension within Bourdieu's work that has so captured sociologists, perhaps reflecting the relative obsessions of the two disciplines: geography with 'pointillism' (Doel 1999:10) and sociology with social class (cf. Lacey and Ball 1976, Urry 2011). For Phillips, 'contemporary actions to gentrify rural spaces may well occur in material contexts which are conditioned in part by legacies of past actions and relations' whereas Bourdieu also focused upon how capital *crosses* fields and therefore the power of those who can mobilise capital to their advantage (Phillips 2005:491):

for Bourdieu class is an effect – not a set of relationships or a structure. It is manifest through the operation of many fields; it is an *emergent effect* of the structuring of many specific fields. Capitals are the underpinnings not of class structure *per se*, but of fields – where volume and trajectory of agents' holdings of particular capitals is central to the dynamics of fields. There is no primary

generative mechanism behind class (as there is, for instance, in the employment aggregate tradition). The emergent effect, class division, arises for Bourdieu across many relatively autonomous fields (Savage et al. 2005:42).

Phillips’ work has therefore been an important, embedding theory into the empirical investigation of rural locales undergoing cultural change. A final example of the use of Bourdieu’s work to explore culture is Heley’s (2010) study of the aspirant middle-classes in Bedfordshire.

Drawing upon fieldwork in one village, like the case study research here, Heley (2010) explored the cultural and consumptive activities of one incoming middle-class group – the ‘new squires’. The account therefore was not the wide view of a village’s gentrification offered by Phillips, nor a dramaturgical model positioning the actor centre stage (Goffman 1959). Rather the aspirational group’s adoption of a role and lifestyle worked at face-value only, distinguishing between parody and pretention (‘*seriously playful*’) (Heley 2010:329, original emphasis). This downplayed the status of the cultural as used by Phillips and the capacity of the actor to activity utilise their tacit knowledge. For example, in contrast for the dramaturgist, the definition of the situation is real in its consequences (Goffman 1997). In Heley’s account the performativity (‘appropriation’) of the new squires was not internalised, as ‘Eamesworth’s new squirearchy were uniformly set in opposition to the High Tory view of landscape and culture which posits a natural and inherently cruel hierarchy as a justification for fox hunting’ (Heley 2010:326). This elects to see shooting as less economically embedded (Wall 2007,

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3 | PACEC 2006). Hence the new squires ‘continue to hold onto their “jet-set” and “city-
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6 boy” identities’ (Heley 2010:328).

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10 | Heley’s work is perhaps a metaphor for the status of both culture and social actor vis-à-
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12 vis rural studies, risking having each foot on different boats. Phillips’ analysis
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14 complemented ed spatial and political-economic dynamics. For Heley, the attention was
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16 upon one group, yet they were granted little agency in their consumption patterns. For
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18 example, the strength of the metaphor of performance (used by both Bourdieu and
19
20 Goffman) is unclear, as action understood to be not ‘always done for some kind of
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22 advantage’ in favour of a model of ‘non-cognitive dwellingness’ (Heley 2010:323;
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24 Edensor 2006:491). Yet an interest in the symbolic or the social via dramaturgy does not
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26 negate the analysis of power (Edgley 2003) and a focus on power elites in the countryside
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28 is timely, Scott (2008) making a powerful argument for a research agenda that includes
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30 an exploration of the operation of ‘interpersonal power’ and class (Scott 2008:40).
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33 Indeed, studies of (the UK) Establishment by sociologists have long focused upon the
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35 ‘old boy network’ and their ‘distinctive normative standards and [...] distinct lifestyle’
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37 (Scott 1992:93). The very public exposure of personal and minuted meetings between
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39 media and government leaders are entrancing the UK media during the UK phone
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41 hacking scandal (BBC 2011).
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51 The challenge becomes to examine the acquisition and performance of fields of capital
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53 and by individuals in the twenty-first century, but not simply in environments where they
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55 are most concentrated. In the same way that Halfacree (2007) applied Lefebvre’s work
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strategically as a means to de-familiarise environmental debates in rural contexts, the paper now attempts to make more explicit the cultural and interactional dimensions. Like Neal and Walters' (2008) narrowly focused upon the über-rural groups of the [Young Farmers' Club](#) and [Women's Institute \(WI\)](#) to deliberately explore how they did (or did not) foster community-making at an interactional level, this paper seeks to see what illuminating effect qualitative empirical work may have for theorising rural spaces ([Hillyard](#) 2007b; 2009; Hammersley 2008). A single-site ethnography [offers](#) a means to explore public themes or societal trends through the detailed context of one village and its school. [Of course, there is no empirical mandate within studies of the interaction order, nor is there clarity amongst scholars who decide to engage in such work \(see Denzin \(2010a, b\) and Hammersley \(2010\) for a commentary of two, cross-Atlantic 'positions' and their conversations\).](#) The paper focuses upon: (a) interpersonal dynamics (high staff turnover and the legacy of a former head); (b) the political-economic development of the village and its shifting local 'squirearchy'; and finally (c) the construction of the spatial environment of the village (post-war expansion and the situating of amenities). It is only through by understanding these three dimensions collectively that the headteacher-absence can be understood and explained.

The research approach

The research is based upon ethnographic fieldwork conducted in 2009-11. The project opened with the perennial interactionist question '*what is happening here?*' (cf. Silverman 2007) was well-suited to the emerging challenge to explore the situation of an absent head and mirrored Payne's (1996) argument that qualitative research inherits the

concerns of those on the ground, as well as the broader ambition to capture both the mundane and the remarkable (Delamont 2002). Using a multi-strategy research approach, the paper draws upon participant observation, interview, documentary, visual and historical material in support of its analysis.

The initial findings from the project's exploration of two village schools rejected the assumption that the school is automatically central to village life ([Bagley and Hillyard 2011](#)). [Hillyard](#) (2010) further argued that rural schools are best understood in context, i.e. amongst local circumstances and regional social histories, and that research must look beyond the school gates (often heralded in policy terms as at the 'heart of village life') to see the state of England's 'green and pleasant land' in twenty-first century, post-productivist times (Marsden 2006). This school (and its absent head) therefore acted as a lens through which to see broader changes through the lived reality of one, rural village environment 'in the round' and also place a value upon the perspectives of those embedded in that locale and milieu – both its 'peasants' and its (new or otherwise) 'squirearchy' ([both respondents' terms](#)). The fieldwork offered here therefore addresses the micro, but in complementary terms to national, even global, analyses (Froud et al. 2006; Marsden and Murdoch 2006; Orton and Rowlingson 2011). It seeks to enhance debates emerging in rural studies through empirical insights, to complement two disciplines' interests (sociology and geography) not denigrate, nor 'inter-galactic paradigm-monger' (Strong 1983:347, see also Miller 1996 and Cloke 1996). [As Woods \(2009\) notes, contemporary rural research is now 'stimulated in part by new theoretical influences, and \[also\] in part by the questions posed by the ongoing restructuring of rural](#)

economies, societies, and polities’ (pp. 439). This therefore necessitates an understanding of rural institutions or organisations (such as schools) as embedded in wider processes of political-economic and global change, whilst recognising that more marginal social actors (such as children) are positioned in such environments particular ways (James and Curtis 2012). For instance, the freedoms they possess to move around their locale out-of-school hours (Christensen et al 2011) need to shape our understanding of children’s wider worlds (Uprichard 2009) alongside those actors traditionally perceived to be rural community generators such as the WI (Neal and Walters 2008). To paraphrase Orwell’s (2003) *Animal Farm*, some actors are more equal than others.

The village was the case study unit, *per se*, but the research showed that this does not equate to ‘a community study’ as was the case with early examples of the community studies genre (Crow and Allan 1994). The fieldwork involved qualitative research throughout the village and whilst some groups are more outward-facing and publically available than others, Payne (1996) reminds us of the need to seek out both the ‘nice’ and the ‘nasty’. One fieldworker was based in the case study Norfolk village for four periods of residential, intensive data collection and concentrated immersion (see Jeffrey and Troman 2004). The research employed a multi-strategy and adaptive approach, engaging in participant observation, approximately forty informal and semi-structured interviews and the analysis of documentary, visual and historical material. Ethnography permits engagement with a myriad of forms of data and knowledge for, as Scott (2008) notes, a portfolio of studies is often required to engage with the complexities of social groups. It was also opportunistic in character, recognising that ‘although the researcher may be

living in a village, he or she is not omnipresent' and cannot be reliant upon the serendipity Wolcott (2010) celebrates (Payne 1996:23). In this particular instance, the technique of the transgressive, 'jolt of surprise' or 'deviant case' of the absent head (Strong 1988; Seal 2010; Thrift 2010) was used as a means to problematise the 'daily routine' (Edensor 2006:491). Using analytic induction (cf. Hammersley 1992), the analysis presented here uses three themes drawn from current theoretical debates (the interpersonal; the political-economic and; space and geography) and informed by an interest in culture and elites.

(a) Interpersonal: staffing and leadership in small schools

The school was a small (circa fifty pupils) primary in rural North Norfolk, in the East of England. It had lacked a permanent full-time head following a series of transient, part-time or acting heads and this had impacted upon social relations inside the school. In the view of one acting head interviewed, the school had effectively been metaphorically 'rudderless.' This was unusual for this school, as since its establishment in the late nineteenth century, it had only employed some twenty headteachers with a pattern of long-service and the founding head had been in post for nearly forty years (source: school logs). This pattern of stability included other key staff, such as class teachers (one retiring after 28 years) and a caretaker (of more than 30 years service). This was significant in a small school, such as here with circa fifty pupils, as there will only be a small number (potentially two) of full-time teachers. Yet, since 2006, there had been six different heads and a rising turnover amongst core and support staff (including the secretary and caretaker) for twenty years. The old-fashioned model whereby the

headteacher lived in the School House next door and his wife contributed to teaching when needed, so frequently documented in the school logs in its early years, had long since disappeared.

The response of some rural schools failing to secure a head appointment has been to appoint a 'shared' headship across two nearby schools (similar to the system where a vicar might act across a number of parishes and churches, whereas once each village would have its own). The school here had an acting head, shared with another school until a permanent appointment could be made. Other changes had also impacted upon the social relations inside the school. The headteacher's accommodation was sold in the nineteen eighties and ended the headteacher's residence in the village and the only people now working in the school and living in the village were the teaching assistants and the caretaker. Dillow (2010) noted the neglected status accorded to teaching assistants (TAs) inside schools (and field research), yet her positive representation of their importance was problematic here. The school's small roll engendered a small teaching staff and the relatively high number of pupils requiring additional support meant that the number of teaching assistants in school exceeded the number of teachers. One former head discussed the new reliance upon TAs support on a more general level:

It was not the expected norm. Whereas now it's absolutely the expectation and, in some ways, to a detrimental effect, whereby teachers can say I've got 26 children and I haven't even got a teaching assistant. So! But it's now expected and people expect to have another adult in there (Interview, former head)

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6 In this specific school, when added to the pattern of high turnover in core staff, a second
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8 issue emerged, as:
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12 your support staff remain constant. And that actually can have its own problems
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14 because it sometimes feels as though the support staff are running the show
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16 because they know where everything is and how it has always worked and aren't
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18 always so keen to embrace anything that might be different. (Interview, acting
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20 head)
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27 This was further exacerbated by a small school roll, whereby even the departure of a few
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29 pupils held significant implications for the budget. One former head (who had moved to
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31 a much larger primary school) reflected, 'we could never make long-term plans for the
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33 school, because you never really knew what the circumstances of the school were going
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35 to be. And I think that was always the most frustrating thing. Then you'd get the staff
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37 staying there longer and all those sorts of things would happen as a benefit and as a result
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39 of that' (for example, running a third class would become financially viable) (Interview,
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41 former head). Effectively, the continuity that had once featured prominently in the
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43 school's past had been completely undermined:
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50 there has been too much change, so they [the parents] can't trust anything any
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52 more. What am I? I'm the third head in four terms [...] we engage with the
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3 parents and, like children, they just find it confusing. So they're not particularly
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5 in tune with the school at the moment. So that's hard (Interview, acting head).
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10 A final, more interpersonal dimension to emerge was the legacy of the school's last, long-
11 term head. They were interviewed during the project, as they had retired and moved
12 away from Norfolk (originally moving from Oxfordshire). This head was the second
13 longest-serving in the school's history (from the early 1990s to mid-2000s) and had
14 retained prominence in village folklore and the memories of remaining staff (including
15 the caretaker and secretary). Her time at the school was spoken of in revered terms:
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27 it was quite strict. You knew you didn't want to cross [headteacher's name], but
28 we all absolutely loved her, she was a great teacher. I think, she was certainly my
29 favourite. I still would say she was one of the best teachers I have ever had.
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31 Definitely (Interview, male village resident, born and raised, early twenties,
32 former pupil during the mid-late nineteen nineties).
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41 Her legacy, however, had served to isolate the school from the community. With the
42 benefit of hindsight, the timing of her arrival was significant for both the village and the
43 national context. The school had recently merged with its neighbouring village (the head
44 of the closed school assumed the new, amalgamated headship before leaving for a county
45 position). This broke the pattern of both residency and the role of the head inside the
46 village (the preceding head having both lived in the village and served on the Parish
47 Council). Externally, the early nineteen nineties was a period of considerable policy
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change in the United Kingdom state education system (Ball 1990), that is effectively demonstrated by the re-branding of the 'School Managers' into the 'Board of Governors' and the new educational framework of the 1988 Education Reform Act set a new, managerial tone (Deem et al 1995). (In contrast with the steady continuity in the evolution of, for example, the Swedish state education system and its underpinning principles (Ball and Larsson 1989).)

The new head excelled in the new policy environment, the school's improved Ofsted performance, for example, attracted national and local press recognition. The following rise in admissions challenged the degrading Victorian infrastructure and its – quite literally – freezing outside toilets (source: school logs). The personal success the head had achieved in the new policy environment therefore led to her next task, very clearly charted through the logs and supported by plans logged in the county archive, to build a new school extension. The logs record, over several years, the sheer numbers of meetings and site visits involved in negotiating the new build. The social cost, to make room on the school site, had been the removal of the village pre-school (the establishment of which she had facilitated) from their base in a portacabin in the school's grounds.

The very success of this head had boosted numbers and necessitated an extension, yet the leadership style and legacy of this head was 'a tightly-run ship' orientated towards the interests of *the school*, rather than the village or pre-school. In her final year, the new extension was opened (which included a sports hall – the only hall in the village), but the

final Ofsted report under her leadership had prompted a membership exodus from the
Governors:

I feel that a note should be recorded here with regard to the makeup of the governing body since our Ofsted inspection. There has been a steady stream of resignations from the governors who were unable to accept Ofsted’s criticisms of their performance. I, too had resigned [from the governors] as I was concerned about their lack of commitment to attend meetings and fulfil expectations in their post Ofsted Action Plan and therefore were not fulfilling their role in the strategic development of the school [...] This leaves only four governors in place. (former head, school logs)

The high staff turnover and the style of running the school had impacted upon village-school relations. One villager commented:

- X: We had a very good headmistress. She was very good for the children, but she didn’t want us using her school.
- SH: Why do you think that was?
- X: Well, she didn’t want it spoilt. (Interview, married female villager, resident 25 years)

The new facilities the head had secured for the school were hence not perceived by the village to be open to all. Her successor reflected on the situation he inherited:

It wasn't perceived to be a school that was open to the community. You may well have heard it from elsewhere, but it was very much a closed shop. [...] when I first arrived there, the [acting] county Head said that, he described the previous regime as being rigid but without rigour, basically. So, everything was very controlled, so how things were done, how things were organised (Interview, former head, mid-2000s)

He and a later head summarised the situation this; as a 'Vicar of Dibley' or somewhat haphazard organisation that had crystallised into a 'blocking,' or 'a can't do here. Just a bit of negativity' mentality amongst villagers connected to the school (Interviews, former and acting heads).

To gauge a wider view, a visiting member of staff who possessed cross-county and beyond Norfolk teaching experience discussed why the school seemed unable to secure a permanent head. The table below separates these into issues facing small, rural schools in Norfolk and the unique circumstances of the village – aspects of which even someone with their experience had found surprising:

Table 1: Small school and village-specific issues.

<i>Issue/ characteristics</i>	<i>Rural, small, Norfolk school-specific</i>	<i>Site-specific</i>
Staffing (a) Intense workload at small schools	'Everybody wears 27 hats' The head: 'you have to have a very strong personal survival rate';	Illness/ difficult personal circumstances amongst core teaching staff in past academic years
Staffing (b) High turnover	Most schools within the cluster had relatively new heads ; ageing demographic of senior staff county-wide; low salary relative to responsibility.	'They [the parents] just find it confusing' [having four different heads in one year]
Catchment	Professions use nearby primary schools, with	'warring' families within the village, conflict spills

	longer hours 'childcare'	into school
Culture	Can have low aspirations; Volunteering / supportive ethic amongst parents	Lacks learning culture; Inertia; 'This is very closed. This has got a can't do mentality'
Infrastructure (a) school	Rural challenge to resource 'because it's going to cost you £100 to get a group of children to a city.'	'A huge white elephant' - expensive new infrastructure to maintain
Infrastructure (b) village-wide	'I live in [nearby village]. It's not a pretty village, the pub's closed, the shop's closed, the church is almost a mile outside the village [...]. And it's got a school, a really thriving school.'	'There doesn't seem to be a hub of the village. The church doesn't seem to feature [...] The facilities are all in the wrong places.'

The table shows the convergence of issues common to small, rural schools and those relating specifically to this village. The individual issues were often surmountable. For example, 'warring' village families with children at the school would defuse once their children transferred to secondary school (larger schools, outside the village). Also, staff were returning to work in the next academic year after periods of illness to join new appointments. However, viewed collectively, they become more significant because of the inertia they represent. Thrift (2010) argues one of the tasks of non-representational theory is to explore resistance to stasis in the capitalism economy, yet the inverse is true here. Expressed more simply, to get the ball rolling would require greater effort than maintaining a momentum. On the specific problem of the absence head, any prospective head (particularly if contemplating their first headship, as in the case of the school's last two appointments), discovering such inertia must have held implications. The highly experienced teacher, with cross-county and beyond experience contextualised the demands on the small, rural school head:

to be a Head in a small school you have to be completely ... well, you can't be selfish, you've got to be about other people. But equally you've got to know when it's your moment, when it's your time. Because the demands on your time

are massive [...], because there's no-one to shield you from it. [...] You have to have a good relationship with your governors [...] No protection, so you have to have a very strong personal survival rate, I think. It's hard – it's a really hard job, but it's very rewarding. But I think this size school is probably the hardest. Just because you haven't got enough grown-ups around you to do all the jobs that are required. (Visiting teacher, with cross-county and beyond teaching experience).

Inter-personal dynamics were therefore important in this school's past and for its future. Nevertheless, it had been possible for a non-residential head to possess high status, or social capital, within the village as a whole. Yet the site-specific issues underpinning the current state of inertia had become significant in their consequences. The paper now looks at the political-economic history and structure of the village, which had also changed significantly. Did this village have a squirearchy, either new or old?

(b) The political-economic development of the village: and the local 'squirearchy'

The village, like so many in Norfolk, had Norman, twelfth century roots. The population had remained relatively constant at circa 250 during the nineteenth century and the key recent economic change was the withdrawal of the largest (absentee) landowner, by land sale after world war two (prior to that, however, they had not resided near the village nor on a nearby estate. Source: trade directories and fieldnotes). Therefore, in the contemporary era, there had never been a 'Lord of the Manor' nor dominant estate (such as the nearby estates of Holkham and Sandringham). Neither was it 'hunt country,'

where a hunt was closely associated to the village (Milbourne 2003) and where full membership was a hallmark of cultural and economic capital (Heley 2010).

Whilst aristocratic patronage was absent, a number of business and/ or landowning families in and around the village were identifiable (source: school logs, Norfolk trade directories and fieldnotes). These were in effect what Newby (1987) termed the ‘owner-occupier commercial farmers’ (Newby 1987:153). The research mapped their length of residency and occupation of key roles alongside their occupation of significant micro-political roles within the village, such as the Parish Council, School Board of Governors (nee School Managers) and church association memberships, showing a strong degree of convergence. The WI was running jointly with a neighbouring village, where all meetings were also held. These families were effectively the old ‘squirearchy’ (a villager’s term), that is, based upon business and land ownership based economic capital in the vicinity of the village. However, as the viability of trades *inside* the village changed in the mid-nineteenth century period (the blacksmiths, shoemakers, bakers and one of the public houses all closed), this squirearchy became less clearly demarked. For example, only a small handful of multi-generation families remained, owning both land and local businesses. A third-generation village resident reflected on his landowning family’s reputation or standing in the village:

I don’t particularly, you know, the name’s not really important [...] there’s no figurehead in [village name] and name’s not important. You say hello and smile when you walk past when you’re walking the dog – that’s fine ... for most people

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3 in [village name] (Interview, Male resident, early twenties, born and raised in the
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5 village)
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10 The view from the young squirearchy was the village had a flat hierarchy and,
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12 intriguingly, by the twenty-first century this mirrored that none of these remaining core
13 families continued to occupy positions on the School Governors or Parish Council, which
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15 were the two forms of local public governance in the village. Local micro-political
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17 power from traditional economic activity did not flow into Council and Governor
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19 membership. Instead, membership of the latter included more education-associated or
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21 qualified members (such as former Ofsted inspectors, headteachers or local authority
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23 officers) who were not necessarily village residents. Upon the retirement of the long-
24
25 serving Governors' chair during the research, this 'new squirearchy' represented an
26
27 amalgam:
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36 There isn't a natural Chair coming out of the group. [...] But they are interesting
37
38 governors because there are three of them who are very village people. One
39
40 who's been here forever – lovely man [...]. [Family's name] [...] they've
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42 obviously not been here very long [...] you would probably be told by the locals
43
44 that they're incomers, but equally, they are, she's really passionate about the
45
46 school and the village (Interview, acting head).
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Village incomers – with cultural and social capital stemming from their professions or educational backgrounds – had also assumed roles previously dominated by the old squirearchy on the Council:

[on] the village Council, a friend of ours, [name], who moved to the village probably sort of four years ago, is now a fairly sort of established member of the village community within the [parish] council (Interview, male, twenties, born and raised)

An internal ‘putsch’, whereby incomers to the village (as the village expanded in size) had replaced the established locals, had reconstituted the local ‘squirearchy’. Effectively, within the space of a few decades, a century of local knowledge had been removed from the two forefront organisations of the village. The professionalization of education and new demands made of governors, described in the first section, may have hastened their departure. The Parish Council membership for example, during the fieldwork, had only one Norfolk-born member. Generational residence, or even village residence for the Governors, were no longer key membership characteristics and hence residential status as a form of social capital had declined. Nor was the new ‘squirearchy’ rich in economic capital (newly acquired or otherwise), as the village contained a wide variety of housing stock and incomes. Nevertheless, the roles remained concentrated among a small network of villagers (with some overlap) and therefore the term ‘squirearchy’ (with its connotations of a concentration of interests and informal associations) remains merited.

The source of 'new blood' into the village's elite was the expanded and diversified built environment that had fostered a new plurality of village residents. Hence it was the affluent worker (albeit something of a misnomer as, for example, the chair of the council was retired, as were members of both Council and Governors), rather than the landowner, now occupying key local governance roles. Ironically, whilst power had moved it had not become necessarily more widely distributed. It would be possible, for example, for significant sections of the village not to be represented on the Parish Council or the Board of Governors. Hence a new headteacher would have no easy means of reaching across (or mobilising) the village community. Furthermore with a Board and council more rich in cultural capital, a young head in their first appointment may face a more daunting prospect than one constituted by born-and-bred villagers. The current new squirearchy, for example at the end of the fieldwork, contained an academic and a retired headteacher. Finally, changes in what physically constituted the village itself – its very spatial environment – and its implications for village relations is now the final dimension explored in more depth.

(c) The geographic location and layout of the village and its implications for the facilitation of social interaction

Thrift (2010) notes the importance of space and what alliances physical space can – and cannot – help foster and this argument resonates with the findings here. Whereas the village school had once been at the heart of the village, with post-war expansion, the village's other amenities had moved to the periphery and hence the 'daily round' of

interactional flows had shifted. This section overviews these changes and then their implications for the school's absent head.

The village was reached just off a main A-road that connected the nearest market town and led out to the east coast of England. Therefore it was less remote than its sister village, which like many other Norfolk rural villages could only be accessed via a network of small, country lanes (single-track in places) and/ or by cutting through other villages. As such, the case study village was remote, but not *too* remote and hence had attracted housing development in the post-war period. Six new residential roads had appeared and a population that had been stable for centuries tripled in a matter of decades (sources: Kelly's Trade Directories; censuses).

The gravitational pull of the A-road was key. The older 'heart' or centre of the village – where the school had been built in the Victorian era – declined with the closure of the older trades (i.e. blacksmiths) making the oldest part of the village (with its Norman church) economically redundant. Indeed, even the old, red telephone box here did not accept coins. The residential builds had also been situated closer to the A-road than the older section of the village. The village was effectively dispersed across three residential clusters or sites; the old centre and the two streets leading to the A-road. These two streets were now in-filled by housing and had generated the new, off-shoot residential roads. The remaining landowning families had sold the land for several of the new roads. Further developments were under discussion – and contestation – during the fieldwork. Whereas Phillips (2005) described how a landowner could restrict – even protect – a

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3 | village from development, the opposite was the case here. Hence this was not the
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6 | gentrification Phillips' (2005) described as, simply, 'we're not a sufficiently pretty
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8 | village for that, are we?' as there were limited barns and cottages to convert (Interview,
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10 | female married resident of 25 years). (The closed pub, for example, had been knocked
11
12 | down and replaced by a new build.) Rather, it made for new and very varied housing
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14 | stock (property prices in the past two years range from £50,000 to over half a million.
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16 |

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18 | Source: www.houseprices.net):
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21 |
22 | this village has had – compared to a lot of the villages [a]round – there's been a
23 | lot of development and [...] they're all houses where they would've been for
24 | younger people and families. Whereas a lot of the other villages around in the
25 | area, they haven't had that sort of – and you get the people that have lived there
26 | sort of for ever and a day, if you like [...] So it would've stayed more like [sister
27 | village] and probably the school would have been – they would have had to go
28 | (Interview, married male village resident, eight years, with children at the pre-
29 | and primary schools).

30
31 |
32 | The expansion of the village had kept the school, but at the same time left it behind, quite
33 | literally, as the only service continuing to be physically located in the geographic heart of
34 | the village. (Whereas in the North East village, the school had moved to a new build on
35 | the outskirts of the village.) In policy terms it was hence a service village (possessing a
36 | Post Office, bus service, village store and public house – all near the A-road).

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38 | (Contrasting with Phillips' discussion of larger north Norfolk village, Thornage, where
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no services remained.) However, the oldest part and new executive housing nearest the school were particularly poorly served. A final irony, for a county renowned for its flatness, was that even those inclined to walk it was problematic as only one of the village's two roads leading to the A-road possessed a footpath. As one resident noted, "there isn't nothing around here. I mean there is the pub but no-one ever go in there. That's changed hands God knows how many times" (Interview, married female, resident eight years). In summary, it had retained a school and services, but not a long-term head nor services equally distributed for all villagers.

Pahl (1965) and Newby (1985) both noted long ago the impact of the motor engine for rural commuting and this was confirmed by one resident, 'I think one big thing is I think if you're gonna live in a village – or live in Norfolk – you need to drive' (resident, married male, 8 years in village). Some villagers even drove to use the post-box on the main street (source: fieldnotes). Therefore, people's social networks have also changed and one villager described how they had been 'allowed to roam the village' as a child on their bike to meet with friends in the village (Interview, male resident born and raised). Patterns of private socialising would be difficult to trace empirically in detail, but what was clear as that *public sites* of social exchange were limited compared to the past. Essentially, unless you owned a dog to walk, were a 'pub-goer', had children at the school/ pre-school or attended church there was little call to walk anywhere. Ironically, even dog-walking spaces around the village were limited to a permissive pathway around a field near the church and dogs were banned from being off-lead on the playing-field. The village has effectively become a dead social space:

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6 it needs to be a driving force from the middle of the village, whatever the middle
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8 of the village is [...] a community school would still have news from the church
9
10 and regular visits from the vicar, even if he has got twenty-seven other churches.
11
12 But there are no real strong community links, which is really interesting. [...] I
13
14 just think it's a funny village. I do actually think it's a very, very funny village
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17 (Interview, acting head)
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22 Intriguing, this had not always been the case:
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27 I mean granddad, I don't know whether granddad said, he's lived here a long time
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29 [1940s+], but there would have been once upon a time when he would know
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31 everybody, everybody in the village. And I shouldn't think he could name you
32
33 half of the people, he wouldn't be able to name you hardly anybody now.
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36 (Interview, male resident, early twenties, born and raised in the village and
37
38 attended the school)
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43 The question of the *pace* of expansion and its impact upon both people and place were
44
45 significant:
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51 I always say I would never buy a house in [village name]. I mean I was born here
52
53 and I'd never buy a house in [village name]! Just you know that's had so much
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55 development, you know, and everyone who live in a council house, you can't tar
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3 them all with the same brush, but you do get some like problem families. And
4
5 there's a lot of quiet little villages in the area that haven't had hardly any building
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7 at all. And you know, and of course you're getting so many of these retired
8
9 people from away, and of course they aren't usually any trouble. But I say, when
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11 you see some old age pensioners walk past here, we don't know anybody.
12
13 (Married male, retired resident born and raised, with family still in the village).
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20 In this village, space worked *against* the enhancement of 'sociality' (to use Neal and
21
22 Walters' (2008:279) term) as more villagers was inversely proportioned to sites of
23
24 interaction. Whilst there were more villagers, sites of interaction had dispersed. Also
25
26 influential is the concept of mobility in a capitalist economy (Urry 2010). Applying
27
28 Urry's 'gamekeeper' metaphor to a village (rather than nation state), its boundaries
29
30 become less socially significant because people are more mobile (Urry 2010:349). More
31
32 simply, "the newcomer does not always feel it is necessary to adapt to the hitherto
33
34 accepted *mores* of the village" (Newby 1985:165). Looking more expressly inside the
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36 school, a former head considered the very microsite of the school merited a 'redesign'.
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38 For example, the new extension moved the headteacher's office physically away from the
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40 daily flow of pupils and also the parents of the youngest cohorts who came into the
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42 school to drop off and collect their children. The head's office was not only empty, but
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44 off the beaten track.
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53 A new or prospective head could immediately gauge the village and amenities the
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55 postcode enjoys at face-value. If they then had the ambition to counter the social
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3 implications of such a dispersed village, it would be a far greater task than faced by their
4 predecessors. Combined with the other circumstances outlined in this paper, whether the
5 headteacher – no matter how adept – could be a catalyst for change is questionable.
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10 Could they wield sufficient social capital to draw together the former elite or those
11 physically removed from possible sites of social interaction? Two former heads, when
12 pressed, expressed doubt as to the school's future viability. The conclusion now pursues
13 the very question of the school's future and the challenge of the village's inertia.
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20 21 22 **Conclusions: 'a funny village' and its future**

23
24 Murdoch et al. (2003) identified a 'differentiated countryside' and like Phillips' use of
25 Bourdieu, rural environments are now constituted by fundamentals of space; materialism
26 and; relationism (Bell 2007:405). The paper saw the inter-personal, political-economic
27 and spatial dynamics converge over the issue of the lack of a head. Importantly, all three
28 dynamics were in synergy: where one dynamic had reconfigured significantly, others had
29 been influenced, too and this the way the future direction of the school might be
30 imagined.
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43 The local social history of this village showed how trends could emerge both slowly and
44 relatively quickly. To return to the example of the staff turnover, the balance between
45 established teaching assistants and new teachers was again to change the following year
46 (including a newly appointed, full-time head):
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So each class will be 50/50 new and old and I think that's a good thing, really.
Because it will give the new head quite a nice blank canvas to, she's not going to
have too many people saying 'we don't do that on a Thursday' (Interview, acting
head).

This, alongside the re-configured Council and Governors, had injected new cultural
capital in the form of young professionals (small business owners and those with
educational credentials) and overlapped with more women occupying key social roles
inside the village (including those new to Norfolk and hence more regional than
immediately local). This suggests that the isolationist or 'blocking' mentality could
change relatively quickly:

The village schools and that round here – for every five people that will tell you
that's a good school, you'll get five tell you that's a rubbish school and I wouldn't
send my kids there. [...] I was always under the impression that if they're gonna
learn they're gonna learn. (Male married resident 8 years, with children at the
primary and pre-schools)

For the longer-term future of the school specifically (and in the light of the issues of
legacy and turnover discussed here) the *retention* of the new head would be key:

People in small schools, they get paid the lowest wage as a head and they
certainly earn their money. You might only be responsible for fifty-eight children

and not 558, but I think you work harder probably than the head of a big school. I think it's more intense (Interview, acting head).

As the discussion above noted, whilst there is currently no collectivity or community feel, long-term residence nor even 'being from Norfolk' were no longer essential towards becoming embedded. Hence, being an outsider became less of a barrier:

If someone's walking by and if I don't know them or I do know them and I'll say hello, regardless, and sort of have a chat. If there's someone lost, looking for directions, I'll perhaps go out of my way. If you came here and didn't do that, if you just went and got your paper and went back to your house and that was it, and you was out in your garden cutting the grass and people walking by and you was just cutting your grass, then I think that's how you would stay, and you could live here ten years and not know your neighbours (Interview, married male, resident eight years).

I think, even if you came from, God forbid, Surreyⁱⁱ, you know, and you came to live in the village, I think if you drank in the pub and you did all the right things, then you're fine. [...] and if you were the teacher [...] you were part of the school and therefore you were part of the village (Interview, acting head).

Therefore this village community and the empirical school case study research can offer a vehicle to test and examine ambitions to theorise rurality.

The focus on the role of the head allowed the importance of inter-personal relations to be emphasised, but not to the point of reductionism (Archer 1995). The possibility is there to embed quickly inside a village, should your circumstances and predispositions permit, meant that you did not need to be a third generation resident to be ‘local’ (Heley 2011:219). Rather, this ‘funny village’s’ convergence of unique circumstances challenged some theoretical expectations, such as the capitalist economy’s resistance to stasis. The question of what are culturally the ‘right things’ remains and how this reflects or relates to the exercising of ‘interpersonal power’ (Scott 2008:40). Heley (2010) and Neal and Walters (2008) selected the shoot and the Young Farmers’ Club as rural hallmarks,ⁱⁱⁱ but will these be in twenty years time? This village showed that the local knowledge of long-established villagers has already been lost from its core organisations and that key figures in a village need not occupy such institutional roles to still remain important people for a village.^{iv} The challenge becomes how to explore the wider, ‘backstage’ networks of such actors. The cultural dispositions of this village’s new squirearchy’s – who will be joined by a new headteacher – will shape the village, whether continuing patterns of urbanisation or via external networks.

A rural education – clearly valued by this school’s cohort despite two-thirds living beyond the village boundaries – retains cultural cache. Whether it is sustainable in contemporary times is questionable. As Cloke noted back in 1996, rural studies is ‘evolving’ and we hope this empirical engagement with the changing cultural dimensions of the rural has enhanced current understanding (Cloke 1996:120). There remains, as

Savage and Williams (2008) argue, empirical impetus and value in the study of (in this case, rural) elites, their networks and definitions of the situation.

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ⁱ ESRC grant number RES-000-22-3412.

ⁱⁱ A county in the south of England.

ⁱⁱⁱ What Milbourne (2003) considered anti-urban. The shoot associated with this village included two villagers, neither from the wealthiest parts of the village, but both from well-known families involved in cross-group activities. A future question would be to

unravel whether this cultural capital transferred into other forms and how. Would these families provide the next 'good citizens' for the village?

^{iv} I am grateful to Graham Crow for this point.

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